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Social Paralysis

Senator Kenneth Keating of New York must be aware that his own state a few years ago enacted a law restricting the right to drive to non-members of the Communist Party. He ought also to be aware that the United States Congress, of which he is a member, has been afflicted for years with bills to count—bar-by-bar—the gold at Fort Knox, to free Lithuania by proclamation, and to denominate grass the national flower.

He is not, therefore, necessarily the man in the best position to rebuke the Mississippi legislature for the imbecilities being discussed at Jackson these days. The New Yorker, in a speech that was his major contribution to the civil rights bill debate so far, even missed a pair of the choicer items on the Mississippi legislative calendar—(1) agitation to run Dr. Jim Silver off the campus at the University of Mississippi because Dr. Silver has had the unwisdom to assert that Mississippi will not tolerate criticism and (2) the biennial proposal to sterilize unwed mothers, alarms concerning which are generally the first nationally disseminated notification that the Mississippi assembly has convened for another attack on the Twentieth Century.

There is the further point to be made about Mr. Keating's alarm that none of the bills which distress him have yet been enacted into law.

Yet an alarm by someone is in order. The proposals which concern Mr. Keating include (1) repeal of the charter of Tougaloo Christian College, a Negro school which has become an integrationist stronghold; (2) re-imposition of enough of the Black Codes to permit local authorities to deny Negroes freedom of movement; (3) the requirement that county officials must vouch for surplus food recipients (with the aim, transparently, of keeping the jobless quiescent); (4) an effort to create a one-party state under law by placing unscalable barriers in the path of the Republicans; and (5) restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly in the name of freedom of commerce.

If none of these are yet law, chances seem to be good that some of them will be before the legislature shuts up shop and goes home. And all of them are being seriously discussed as proper and efficient exercises in government.

Arkansas has had her own melancholy recent experiences with yahoo legislation but little, if any, of it has been quite comparable with the Mississippi pattern. (The difference is perhaps suggested by the status of the Sovereignty Commissions created by the two state legislatures as all-purpose regulatory agencies of race relations, with a warrant for everything from inquisition to propagandization. In Arkansas, the Sovereignty Commission was speedily dehorned by the State Supreme Court and is now a dead letter. In Mississippi, it seems to have as much power, and as much money, as it thinks it needs and in fact functions as an official arm of the Citizens Councils.)

Dr. Silver, the Ole Miss history professor whose job is now threatened, seems to have summed it all up:

In committing itself to the defense of the biracial system, Mississippi has erected a totalitarian society which to the present moment has eliminated the ordinary processes by which change may be channeled. Through its police power, coercion and force prevail, instead of accommodation, and the result is social paralysis. * * *

And yet * * * it seems inescapable that Mississippians one day will drop the mockery of the late Confederacy and resume their obligations as Americans. It is just that there is small reason to believe that they will somehow develop the capability to do it themselves; to do it, as William Faulkner said, in time. If not, the closed society will become the open society with the massive aid of the country as a whole, backed by the power and authority of the federal government.

A grim set of presumptions? Of course. But they do have the virtue of making the Mississippi legislature seem comprehensible. The legislature's performance—both in debate and in the bills it finally passes—becomes more remarkable every two years because the pressures for change become greater every two years. Mississippi, committed to the past, must take increasingly extreme action to stave off the future.